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Subcommittee on the Middle East & Central Asia

Good afternoon Madame Chairman, Honorable Members of the Subcommittee, Ladies and gentlemen

It is with great honor that I stand before this distinguished Subcommittee on the Middle East in the US Congress to address you on behalf of the Syrian Democratic Coalition represented by its spokesman Mr. Jean Antar (who could not be with us today) and the Reform Party of Syria represented by its spokesman Mr. Oubai Shahbandar and a member of the Executive Committee Mr. Marc Hussein. I also want to thank my colleagues Sheikh Abdullah Al-Tamimi of the Free Patriotic Party and a member of the SDC, and Mr. Abdul Latif Al-Mounaer of the Syrian Third Alliance.

We thank the Subcommittee for giving us this opportunity to analyze the situation in Syria and what recommendations we have to the Syria Accountability Act.

Status of the Assad Regime

As we all know, Baschar al-Assad, the dictator of Syria who inherited the presidency from his late father Hafez al-Assad, has been openly hostile to the interests of not only the Syrian, the Lebanese, the Iraqi, and the Jordanian people but also to the interests of the international community. Armed with an unholy alliance with Iran, and emboldened by the Hamas election win, Assad has been on a wrecking expedition to insure that real democracy does not reach the shores of Syria.

Today, the regime feels safe and secure on several fronts. First, the Syrian opposition inside the country is stifled, unable to even express its opinion let alone manage to become threatening to the regime; the exiled Syrian opposition is divided between a Ba'athist/Islamist front represented by National Salvation Front (NSF) and a liberal/market economy front represented by SDC. Second, Iran is playing an important role in supporting Assad. And third, the pressure from the US administration has been inconsistent; we believe mainly because of other pressing international strategic issues.

Status of Human Rights Conditions inside Syria

Inside Syria, the situation is impossible to the hundreds of civil society individuals who are facing the wrath of the regime in the form of arrests, detentions, constant harassment, long-term imprisonment, and even torture. Dissidents are unable to express freely their beliefs; journalists are unable to expose government corruption or

hold officials accountable; intellectuals are unable to meet and educate the masses about the benefits of a strong civil society. In short, human rights conditions are appalling and we urge this Subcommittee to address this issue by amending SALSA.

Syria is governed under the threat of a set of Emergency Laws that empowers the Syrian authorities to arrest anyone for any reason bypassing whatever constitutional protections Syrians have. These laws have been enforced ever since the Syrian Ba'ath Party came to power, exactly 43 years ago.

Using these emergency laws, in the last few weeks, many dissidents have been arrested and some exposed to beating. May I take this opportunity to mention in this regard Mr. Fateh Jamous, Mr. Michel Kilo, and Dr. Kamal Labwani who are facing life sentences for expressing freely their ideas? I also would like to mention Dr. Aref Dalilah, Mr. Ali Abdullah and his son Mohammad, Mr. Mohammad Al-Ghanem, Mr. Khalil Hussein, Mr. Riad Darar, Mr. Omar al-Abdullah, Mr. Diab Suriya, Mr. Nizar Rastwani, Mr. Ayham Sakr, Mr. Alam Fakhour, Mr. Maher Isber, Mr. Hissam Milhem, Mr. Ali Al-Ali, Mr. Fayez al-Hallak, Mr. Anwar Hamoudah, Mr. Amer Kezaranah, Mr. Tarek Al-Ghorani, and Mr. Fahd Da'adoush who all still languish in prisons in addition to hundreds of Kurdish citizens. Also, the illegal arrest and harassment of Dr. Ammar Qurabi, Mr. Riad Seif, Mr. Ma'amun Al-Homsi, Mr. Najati Tayyara, and Mr. Samir Nashar as well as Mr. Abdul Sattar Qattan who has been imprisoned for 12 years for reasons unknown; not to mention the constant harassment of the Damascus Spring dissidents to stop them from meeting. In brief, the Syrian dissident and civil society community is under siege inside Syria. We honor their work and lend them our full support.

We also salute the Khaznawi family that suffered the death of its great patriarch Sheikh Maa'choukh Al-Khaznawi at the hands of the Syrian authorities. Sheikh Al-Khaznawi was an example of servitude, honesty, and moderation to all Syrians.

I also want to mention that many Syrians languish in Iraqi jails and we hope this Subcommittee helps to free the innocent so that they can return to their families. On this score, we urge you to inquire with the Department of Defense of their fate in Iraq. This will go a long way in showing that the US Congress stands by the Syrian people in their suffering whether at home or elsewhere.

Syrian Opposition Status

The Syrian opposition is going through transformational change that I am not too sure serves the best interests of Syria.

Today, there are four major opposition strands that are shaping the dissident community: 1) Remnants of the Damascus Declaration (DD); 2) The National Salvation Front (NSF); 3) The Syrian Democratic Coalition (SDC); 4) The Kurdish Movement (KM).

1. Damascus Declaration

In the past six months, we have seen a group of dissidents inside Syria form a new threat to the Assad regime at the height of Assad's fear from an international backlash to the killing of Hariri. United behind the Damascus Declaration, a document exploring the future outlook of a new Syria, most of these dissidents have faltered because of the recent pressure from the regime and because of the inability to be active. The majority of Syrians involved in DD practice the policies of excluding others. The best example is how Damascus Declaration dissidents treated Dr. Kamal Al-Labwani when he returned to Damascus after meeting w/J.D. Crouch, Assistant to the President. They lent him no support and ignored his plight when sent to prison. Most of the Damascus Declaration dissidents see the United States as a big evil country and refuse to have any realistic vision on how to change the regime. Today, the Damascus Declaration is non-existent with many dissidents joining two other opposition camps: The Syrian Democratic Coalition and the National Salvation Front. However, the Syrian opposition outside still claims the legitimacy of DD because it legitimizes their struggle.

2. National Salvation Front

The National Salvation Front was formed recently between the Muslim Brotherhood and the ex-vice president of Syria Abdul Halim Khaddam, a Syrian-Saudi who defected after 35 years of service to the Ba'ath Party. This unholy alliance between the Ba'athists and the Islamists has rocked the opposition to its core for many reasons. Khaddam was part and parcel of the Ba'ath Party, and remains so today. He played an important role in defining and protecting the dictatorship of Hafez al-Assad in such areas as stifling liberties of Syrians and taming Lebanon to the whims of the Assad family. His past corruption in a non-accountable environment makes him an unpopular figure amongst Syrians.

The first act of the National Salvation Front was to draw "red lines" against some of the opposition figures and organizations very similar to the ones we see practiced by the Ba'ath Party. The first lesson of democracy is to accept the other political point of view and try to win your arguments not through exclusion but through persuasion. On that score, NSF has failed the democracy test and many of us believe that some of the Syrian opposition figures leading the NSF are as autocratic as the Assad regime and do not truly understand or care to understand what democracy is all about. NSF, for its part, is betting that stability matters more than democracy.

The Assad regime has oppressed the MB greatly through the execution of any of their members using Syrian Law 49 of 1980. Syrians sympathize with the MB because of the unfairness of Law 49, which serves the Assad regime well because it is able to say that the alternative to our rule are the Islamists. We Syrians believe that the US Congress can and should help pressure the Assad regime to revoke Syrian Law 49 because it is inhuman by amending SALSA.

Furthermore, SDC has verifiable information that Khaddam, between September and December of 2005, and just prior to joining the opposition, allegedly laundered five billion USD, deposited in Swiss bank accounts, through high-level Saudi connections. These funds must be returned to the Syrian and Lebanese people, their legitimate owners. The sad part is that Khaddam is trying to change his image to one fighting corruption when he is the ultimate corrupt official.

3. Syrian Democratic Coalition

The Syrian Democratic Coalition is an amalgamation of liberal and market economy political and humanist organizations. In SDC, the Arabs and the Kurds sit side-by-side so do Muslims (Sunni and Shia'a), Christians, Alawites, Druze, and many other groups representing the mosaic of Syria.

On June 9, 2005 and during the 10th Ba'ath Congress, the Ba'ath party declared the Syrian Democratic Coalition and the Reform Party of Syria (RPS) as non-entities, enemies of the State. From that date on, anyone associated with, deals with, or joins SDC or RPS are automatically questioned and jailed. Many of our supporters are in jail today.

As such, the movement is under constant attacks not only by the communist/nationalist movements inside Syria, who see our vision as emulating the success of many countries in the west as a dangerous precedent, but also by the Ba'athists such as we find in Khaddam's National Salvation Front. We, liberals, are a threat to the Assad regime and to all those who wish to continue with the same old policies that have failed Syria.

Our popularity inside and outside Syria is measurable and on the rise. From tribal leaders to the Ashrafs (Mr. al-Mounaeir present here is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad - SAAS), SDC is the umbrella organization able to unite Syrians without any bias. Inside Syria, many of the people who signed on with the Damascus Declaration are secretly hoping we succeed because they lived under Ba'athism for too long and want to experience a new Syria with policies that have a record of success. None of them wants Syria to be another laboratory for one more set of failed Ba'athist policies. We are also supported because the leadership of the Syrian Democratic Coalition has no history of corruption or atrocities against the Syrian people.

SDC is meeting within soon to announce our program for peaceful transition to democracy for Syria. After the announcement, we believe that SDC will gain the momentum necessary to have more vocal support, which has been lacking for fear of retribution.

4. The Kurdish Movement

The Kurdish Movement is characterized by a mature opposition inside Syria and one that is more nascent outside Syria. Those on the inside are very much influenced by

the Iraqi leadership in the Kurdistan area of Iraq. They rally around three or four strong political parties such as the Yekiti, the Kurdish Future Movement, and the Democratic Party. The Kurdish movement is strong and is able to mobilize the masses. Their leadership is the most democratic we have witnessed amongst all the other opposition parties. It is very important for this Subcommittee to meet with some of the leaders of these political organizations or their representatives.

The Kurdish Movement promotes the aspiration of the Kurdish people who have been mistreated by the previous as well as the present Assad regime, their lands confiscated, and their culture and language stifled. Kurds in Syria are treated as third class citizens even though their contribution to the Syrian society and its economy is considerable. SDC and RPS intend to partner with the Kurdish movement, upon return to Syria, to write our new constitution. Only through determination of their own destiny can Syrians experience true democracy. Their fate is directly connected to the future of our democracy in Syria.

We ask the Subcommittee to honor the Kurds for their courage and to pressure the Assad regime, through amendments to the Syria Accountability Act, to free the Kurds who are still languishing in Syrian jails. We also ask the Subcommittee to hear the testimony of prominent Kurdish leaders from the US and Europe for details of their plight.

SDC relationship with the Kurdish Movement is strong and continues to grow because of common values and goals.

Mme. Chairman, it pains me to testify today that we do not believe that the Syrian opposition is mature enough to assume power in Syria. The majority behaves like the Ba'athists ruling the country with a set of exclusionary policies, which are in direct conflict with real democracy. Our short term aim, as such, is to give-up on the issue of regime change in Syria until the opposition unites.

5. Recommendations for US Policymakers

We ask this honorable Subcommittee to seriously consider amendments to SALSA for the following:

- A) Amend SALSA to force the Syrian government to free ALL prisoners of conscience.
- B) Amend SALSA to support openly the democratic Syrian opposition inside the country.
- C) Amend SALSA to force the Syrian government to lift all Emergency Laws.
- D) Amend SALSA to rescind Article 8 of the Syrian Constitution.
- E) Amend SALSA to rescind Law 49 of 1980.
- F) Amend SALSA to honor moderate Muslims in Syria and to protect their religious rights.

- G) Amend SALSA to honor the Kurds, the Christians, the Alawites, the Druze and all other groups in Syria and to protect their heritage.
- H) Amend SALSA to honor Sheikh Ma'achouk al-Khaznawi for his courage.
- I) The US and Europe can invite the 10 most prominent Syrian opposition leaders in the hope that they can unite and become a viable alternative.

Additional Facts about Syria (for the record)

The Ba'ath party is the enemy of democracy. Like Nazism, the Ba'athist Assad regime encourages hate and enmity against anyone that does not support their ideology. If given the chance to think freely, most Syrians will appreciate the United States if it helps bring about their freedom peacefully.

Part of my work as one of the leaders in the opposition, a Muslim-American, and a keen observer of Middle East politics is to provide a snapshot that can help the US Congress understand the great divide that exists today in the social fabric of the Syrian society; a divide that can only be reconciled with some heavy lifting on the part of the Syrian opposition that inevitably will see regime change as the only reasonable alternative to the Assad era of oppression and corruption. On that score, let me present the following important points:

1. Liberal Arab voices are stifled by the authoritarian Arab regimes and although, there are some genuine efforts to help, over all they are not provided the backing they deserve by the west. Organizations like the Hudson Institute, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, Freedom House, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and American Enterprise Institute are helping immensely but we are still fragmented. We look for the US Congress to fund the think tanks mentioned for the purpose of raising the profiles of liberal movements. We believe any upcoming and much needed Arab renaissance will be influenced by Muslims who have experienced governance in western societies. We want to thank the NEA at the US State Department for their continued support of Syrian dissidents in all aspects.
2. The people of Syria are proud and honorable people that have been subjected to a ruthless totalitarian regime. In recent months, the Syrian opposition has witnessed old Ba'athists, dressed in a democracy cloak and touting salvation for Syrians, present themselves as an alternative to the Assad regime in the hope that they can bring back the same policies, under a new name, that have failed Syria. Their actions of exclusion and hate mirror those of the Assad regime and we believe Syrians deserve better. We ask that the US Congress amends SALSA to block any support for corrupt Ba'athists planting themselves inside the opposition.
3. The Assyrians and Caledonians, in addition to other Christian groups, who are the indigenous people of Syria, have been forced to emigrate for lack of opportunity, discrimination, and suppression of their religious rights. We appeal to this subcommittee to understand their plight. Only freedom and

democracy can restore their rights to celebrate their contribution to the Syrian society and help facilitate for their safe return to Syria.

4. Women in Syria suffer on two fronts: 1) Lack of a support system and laws to protect the abused and the disfranchised and 2) Lack of economic opportunities that stifle their hopes. Liberalism and a vibrant market economy is the best protection we can afford women in Syria. I cannot emphasize to this Subcommittee how important the impact of the role of Syrian women will have on the Syrian society.
5. In 1982, the guns of the Assad family were turned against the innocent Syrian people in Hama that leveled this small historical city. When the smoke settled and cleared, up to 30,000 innocent people were massacred. Syrians are starting to mobilize to bring the criminals who committed this genocide to the International Court of Justice in The Hague.
6. Our youth suffer on two fronts: 1) Unemployment of up to 60% amongst less than 25 years old, which breeds restlessness and in turn can breed a readiness to be recruited for terrorism, and 2) An unfair two-year mandatory military service that has become a well oiled corruption machine. We will, upon return to Syria, change the Syrian Constitution to ban mandatory military service. Syria does not need over 300,000 soldiers nor do we need to spend valuable resources on an arm race we are sure to lose. Our resources are better utilized helping the Syrian economy.
7. Corruption in Syria touches everyone and the Assad regime has permitted corruption to run amok. Syrians pay officials to have medical operations, they pay officials to get a phone line, they pay school officials to pass exams, and even they pay judges to get the verdict they want. Corruption is breeding a sense of hopelessness, especially amongst our youth, which inevitably feed our young minds with anger. Why are we surprised at what drives a suicide bomber to kill and be killed? People in the Middle East have no hope in any prosperous future because of the authoritarian systems in place, which smother their attempted rise from poverty.
8. The New Syria must compensate Syrian families who lost their assets and lands in the fifties to nationalization and three failed agriculture reforms. This compensation must be based on the fair market value of these assets today. Additionally, we believe that the traditional merchant families of Syria represent an important component that can and will save Syria from an ever looming economic disaster.
9. The New Syria must also compensate all prisoners of conscience financially for their illegal detention and imprisonment. Once the Assad era ends, we will propose a new legislation in the Syrian parliament to compensate generously all ex-prisoners. Some of them are tomorrow's leaders of Syria; they represent the brightest minds that chose to stay and suffer to help save their country. We Syrians abroad honor them and owe them our unconditional respect.

We thank this honorable Subcommittee for giving us the opportunity to speak about our beloved Syria.